

An obituary notice from the August 1895 edition of *Baily's Magazine of Sports and Pastimes* by F B Doveton.

Perrott, the Dartmoor Guide

James Perrott, the famous fisherman and Dartmoor guide, who died at Chagford in May last, in his 81st year, came of ancient lineage, as might be seen from the emblazoned scroll and coat-of-arms which hung in his moorland home. And he showed it. His was a singularly shrewd and striking face, with a high, dome-like forehead, and twinkling grey eyes, which betrayed a keen sense of humour. He was indeed remarkably like the existing portraits of Shakespeare, save that his eyes were rather smaller and his face longer and thinner. There was, too, something Shakespearian about the man's breadth of view (considering his rather narrow sphere) and knowledge of character, which was really remarkable.

He had guided many men of divers minds, some very great men, across the dreary Devon wild, and had learnt something from each. Though chained to a remote moorland village, he then became somewhat of a cosmopolitan in his mental outlook, and his natural shrewdness enabled him to read some men at a glance. He had picked up during his long life a vast amount of useful knowledge as well as out-of-the-way lore, antiquarian, folk, natural historic, and what not. His delightfully quaint speeches, so truly original, and his racy stories will never be forgotten by those who heard them. But they lose much at second-hand. You want that keen, humorous, weather-beaten face looking into yours, and the flash of fun in those quick, grey eyes, to enjoy these tales as they deserve, and that, alas, is impossible now.

I have known him ever since boyhood, somewhere in the late fifties, when "old Chaggiford" was a very different place from the present village (no rail to Moreton then). We used to drive out from Exeter, and put up at the Three Crowns, in whose ancient porch Sidney Godolphin is said to have been killed. By the way, it was at the Globe Inn I remember that we used to stay, and not at the Three Crowns, which is a few yards further down the street.

The quaint old market-place was standing then on unhewn granite pillars, and a very picturesque structure it was; it was demolished about 1864. Chagford was not then a fashionable resort, and the place was primitive in the extreme. Electric light and telegraphs were still in the womb of the future, and the fishing was free everywhere. The tiny rillet then, as now, tinkled under the churchyard walls just opposite the inn, and each night was our lullaby to dreamland.

How well I remember the cosy old room at the *Globe*, giving on the churchyard, where we youngsters, wearied with our sport in beautiful Gidleigh Park, or on the East Dart at Post Bridge, used to punish our host Gregory's good fare in the gloaming, not forgetting the strawberries and cream! To us would enter little twelve-year-old Anne Gregory, with an enormous pile of bread-and-butter on a huge plate for the hungry Waltonians. When my father expressed surprise at the quantity, how glibly from those red young lips came the response, that still rings in my ears, "Only six pieces apiece, please, sir". Later in the evening friend Perrott, then a wiry, active, middle-sized man of about forty-three or four, in rough tweed suit and fly-garnished hat, would make his appearance, sitting on the extreme edge of his chair, and delighting us with his quaint observations on men and fish.

One remark of his I shall never forget at this period. The trout were one day jumping clean out of the water in that wholesale manner which bodes ill luck to the fisherman, as they never do this when feeding in real earnest. Perrott told us they were only "cricketing"! How this quaint comment tickled us youngsters at the time!

A long time elapsed after this ere I saw my friend again. It was on a dark morning in July, 1875, that I met him by appointment at Dunsford Bridge on the Teign, when, though we had not met for about sixteen years, he suddenly emerged from the shadow of the old structure, with his quick salute and his cheery "Good morning, sir!" as though we had only parted the day before. And what a soaking trudge we had nearly twelve miles up the stream to Chagford, arriving there in the dark about 10:30 p.m. But Perrott was only sixty then, and as agile as a roe, whilst I was in my golden days. But our chief fishing days together occurred between the years 1877 and 1891 or 1892.

After that last year the grand old fellow was too infirm for fishing trips, but received visitors as the *G.O.M.* might, in his easy chair at home, where he tied excellent flies up to a very recent date, with his youngest daughter, his right hand and factotum. This tiny room, with its collection of rods and nets in the corner, its glass case of photos of the neighbouring scenery, its emblazoned parchment in frame, and last but not least the old armchair where the white-haired patriarch of modern Zebedees sat, is a classic spot to most of our West Country anglers. I should not omit the coloured sketch of a gigantic trout killed by the eldest son Dick, a rare fisherman and worthy successor to his father's business, in the Chagford Weir pool many years ago.

In September, 1877, I passed a part of my honeymoon at Chagford, and Perrott, I remember, who was then only sixty-two, tooled a pair of sinewy ponies in front of us from Moreton. How well I recollect that faraway time in soft September, and the many pleasant excursions my wife and I took with the fine old fellow in divers directions, especially to the Taw, Bovey, and Teign!

One golden day I shall never forget when we were lurching on the edge of a boggy bit, just under Belstone. We had been talking politics, and Perrott had told us he thought England should clap her hand on them Russians before it was too late, to which we heartily assented. Then we turned to the temperance question, when Perrott, flourishing a pint bottle of Bass on high, exclaimed, "There, sir! that's the curse of England!" and immediately swallowed the contents, as though determined that that especial bottle at any rate should do no further harm!

Nothing so very remarkable, perhaps, in all this; but the quaint, original manner (so entirely his own), and his droll way of putting the case, will never be forgotten by the writer. The way to the river that ensuing autumn morning in our somewhat primitive conveyance, Perrott, by way of keeping up our spirits, had descended on all the notable murders and suicides which had occurred in the vicinity in his memory.

"There, sir," he would say, pointing to an oak tree in the dingle below, "I mind a man hanging himself from that very tree some years ago." Then, again: "A pretty bad murder took place at that house over yonder," and so on. The incongruity of the theme on that soft, bright morning, and amid that lovely scenery, struck me much at the time.

Then we asked him that day if he had heard of Byron. This was a poser, as the neighbourhood seemed flush of Byrons! There was Doctor Byron over the hill, Mr. Byron down yonder, &c. "Which Byron do you mean?" he asked. We told him, but the fame of the great poet had not reached his ears, I fear.

From that year, 1877, until 1893 I passed nearly every May at Chagford, with Perrott for my angling companion. The longer I knew him the more I loved him for his quaintness, geniality, simple piety, and solid worth, and I think he was equally fond of me. How vividly the pictures of those bygone summer days rise from the dissolving mists of the past, as they are scattered by the magic wand of memory.

How well I remember the sweet spring days passed amid the whitening thorns and under the alders by bonny Bovey, where we often had some rare troutting in that faraway time, and where every nook and bend of the brook has some pleasant association. There, under the alders, Perrott once lost a valued clasp knife, which he never found, I fancy. Under that big stone in the stream just below Wormhill Bridge, Perrott long, long ago caught a pounder, and we never passed the spot without recalling the fact. A pounder, I may say, is, indeed, a rarity so high up the Bovey as this, and to be prized accordingly.

Into that deep pool where the brook turns so sharply I once slipped up to my knees, and Perrott promptly borrowed a worthy lady's stockings, which were vastly too large for me, though probably they saved me a sore throat. How the grey eyes of the veteran used to twinkle as we recalled this episode in after years. He never forgot it.

At another bend of bonny Bovey some primroses and forget-me-nots on an old tree stump were reflected in the limpid mirror below, showing dimly fair in the clear depths like dream-flowers. My old friend was always enraptured with this sight. He may see it now. Who can tell?

Then, what happy days we passed together deep in the green and lovely valley of the South Teign, sheltered from the scorching sun by the luxuriant greenery everywhere, and our sunburnt faces dashed with the cool silvery spray of the noisy little stream as it pluckily fights its way between the mossy boulders through many a fairy dell, where reigns a delicious green gloom - a "dim, religious light," that we Devonian anglers love so well!

Far up into the very heart of the stern wild moorland did we often wander together, along the margin of the lonely North Teign, where the solitudes are almost appalling, and nothing breaks the silence save the wail of the despairing curlew overhead, and the babble of the rocky winding river.

And in all these rambles the wonderful old fellow was my constant companion, till he seemed to grow into the surroundings, and become a part of the scene itself. He used to fish beautifully up to within the last few years or so, when his eyesight failed him. I suppose no man in England threw a better fly; he once caught a thousand trout in a week, all with the fly, though strange to say, through all his long life he never caught three trout at once, as I have done several times, nor did he ever land a fish above a pound and a quarter.

No figure so sinewy and wiry as his, up to seventy, say, or over, or so agile at surmounting boulders and other obstacles. At seventy he could beat me hollow (I am a little over fifty) in climbing and jumping, and he was over a hedge or gate like a bird.

No eyes were so unerring as this G.O.M.'s in detecting the fly the trout were taking, and no fingers so deft as his in manipulating the clever imitation then and there. His knowledge of Dartmoor trout and their ways was simply wonderful, and if he could not catch a dish of the beauties in his golden days - why, then the game was up as far as anyone else was concerned. As to the mileage he had covered on foot through his long life, I dare say he had tramped, from first to last, nearly a quarter of a million, and that in all weathers.

During his life he had seven rheumatic fevers, and I think he put on an extra flannel shirt after each fever, so he had nearly as much wool upon him as a sheep, and was well armed against the vagaries of the Dartmoor climate. He knew Dartmoor better than any living man, and short cuts home through the wilder parts of the waste were no more to him than a short cut through a passage or alley would be to a townsman.

The tors to him were as children, and he called them all by their names, speaking of them almost reverently, and with an affectionate interest that was characteristic of the man. He had walked the moors with such men as Dickens, whom he once pulled out of a bog, R D Blackmore (who brought him into his novel *Christowell*), Charles Kingsley, and many other men of note. With the last-named, indeed, he was very intimate in the early forties, and he always called him "Mr. Kingsley" in speaking of him.

He used to relate with great unction how Mr. Kingsley had once proved beyond doubt one morning by Teign-side that he (Perrott) was much better off than himself from a worldly point of view; and, "By George! sir," the veteran would add, with a twinkle in his eye, "he did prove it right enough, I warrant, though I can't mind his argument now, 'tis such a mortal time ago." One specimen of his native wit may be given here. I once asked him whether an old man would be insulted by my offering him a half-a-crown. "Try him, sir," said Perrott; "I warrant he'll pocket the insult!"

Not only was my old friend the best living guide to the antiquities of Dartmoor - his lore about cromlechs, hut circles, Druidical remains, &c., being inexhaustible - but he had acquired an intimate acquaintance with the flora and fauna of the moor (he was passionately fond of flower-hunting), and on ferns and trees especially he was an acknowledged authority.

Whether lying at full length amid the purple heather after our halt for lunch, with his beloved black cutty between his lips, and his kindly, shrewd grey eyes divided between me and the scenery, or whether blowing a cloud in my snug parlour at night after the day's sport was over, with his joram of old Irish at his elbow, he never ceased pouring out quaint, dry sayings, all worth remembering (though hard to remember), and all uttered in that rich Devon dialect which suited him so well.

He was fond of his high-sounding expressions, too, and used to talk of "two sons and a maiden being under his jurisdiction at present", and he would often ask what time was nominated for our start the next morning.

He had many curious stories to tell of old Chagford in his early boyhood, when the farmers bore their dames to church pillion-fashion, and wore strong felt square-shaped hats of great weight, and when the maidens used mounting-stones in getting into their saddles.

He had walked into Exeter when a lad of twenty-one to see Thomas Oliver hung in July, 1836, for the murder of Mr. Reuben May, the Dunsford miller, on his return from Moreton market one summer evening. Another man supposed to be implicated in this crime, but subsequently proved to be innocent, was, it will be remembered, released from transportation after serving for nearly forty years. Edmund Galley was his name.

Though a bit sceptical in such matters himself, he was rather fond of the weird and uncanny, and used to love to yarn about the apparitions his father - a stout and bold English yeoman - had seen in his younger days on the dreary moorland. His knowledge of birds, too, was very accurate. He alone could identify a hoopoe that was shot years ago in company with starlings near Yardworthy, on the South Teign.

In October, 1889, Perrott and his grand old spouse celebrated their golden wedding at Chagford, when all classes proved their love and respect for him, and he was the recipient of a very numerously signed memorial and a purse of money.

He now sleeps soundly in the churchyard of his beloved moorland home, and Chagford can never be the same place again to me, for of him it may be truly said,

"We shall not look upon his like again."

F. B. Doveton.